

Employed Individuals with Disabilities Program
Testimony on SB 790
Position: FAVORABLE

March 11, 2024

The Honorable Pamela Beidle, Chair Finance Committee
Miller Senate Office Building, 3 East Wing
11 Bladen St., Annapolis, MD 21401
cc: Members, Finance Committee

The Honorable Chair Beidle and Members of the Committee:

I live in Maryland and am writing to support SB 790. I will be testifying tomorrow as the incredibly lucky fiancé of Josh Basile, who is a quadriplegic paralyzed below the shoulders, a power wheelchair user, and an Employed Individuals with Disabilities (EID) program recipient.

When I first met Josh in 2019, I was in immediate awe of his passion for advocacy and his talent to balance work, life, and family. Before he proposed in 2020, he assured me that our ability to marry was on the horizon. He had dedicated over a year of his time facilitating a workgroup with the previous administration, working on the same goal that sits in front of you now, 4 years later. He has been told, 'just wait' and 'now is not the right time' for too many years.

What many assume about individuals with disabilities is that they are unable to engage in the standard activities that we uphold to be the foundation for a partnership or sustaining a family. I believe this is why this bill continues to be overlooked, underfunded, and pushed aside year after year. It saddens me that over 50 years have passed since Section 504 of the Rehabilitation Act was signed into law and here we are still arguing to be afforded the same rights, freedoms, and privileges to access the benefits that are tied to marriage, employment, and healthcare.

Families of those with disabilities already have enough to fight for. Did you know that because of current legislation, most healthy, active, and young quadriplegics are removed from their homes to live in a geriatric health care setting? Did you know that when a married individual suffers a spinal cord injury (SCI), they are often forced to divorce their partner to maintain access to appropriate health care. Can you imagine your entire world being turned upside down, your body no longer a reflection of who you once were, and now during this most vulnerable point in your life, you are forced to divorce? What if you were told that you had to retire at 65? That you could no longer make an income to contribute to your family. That the work that drives you, fulfills you, is stripped away from you even when you have decades of knowledge to contribute still in you.

Well, before dating Josh, I didn't know any of those things either. However, with Josh as my partner, I am forever connected to families who have been affected by a SCI. What

most are not privileged to see is the inner turmoil and declining mental health of those with a SCI. Most are males, who were the active breadwinners of their families. And when legislation takes away their ability to continue in this role, far too many slip into a deep sustained depression that has the power to do more damage than the physical injury they sustained.

By not passing this bill, what you are telling people with disabilities is that they are not valued as partners, as breadwinners, as employees, as contributing members of society. They are to stay seated and accept subpar opportunities, no possibility of advancement, no prospects of marriage or family because you have deemed them 'burdens' instead of 'contributors to society.'

Although my fiancé has no control of his body from the chest down, he is anything but a burden. He is a supportive partner, an active father, an athlete, a role model, and the hardest worker I have ever known. And although I know the decision you make today on this bill could never strip any of those qualities away from him, I do have a deep fear.

I am no longer speaking to you as Josh's partner but as Faeble's mother. My beautiful daughter has 2 dads. A fully able-bodied biological one that has failed her repeatedly and no longer has legal or physical rights and this man seated before you. This man has fully embraced fatherhood since day one. This man was excited to meet a divorced single mom because he was unsure if he would be able to have biological children. This man who prioritizes his children over all else. He has found ways to play, to teach, to work, and to comfort them. With him, my children are safe, loved, and provided. Nothing in this world is more important to me than my children. This is why I have a deep fear that if, heaven forbid, anything were to happen to me, my daughter would be stripped of the father who has raised her and protected her and be forced to reside with her biological father.

There are so many implications tied to this bill that you may not fully understand. This one implication is my personal 'why'. By passing this bill, you open the doorway for Josh and I to get married which in turn allows him to legally adopt Faeble. It allows him to provide her safety and protection and love no matter what happens to me. It allows her to stay in the same home as her little brother, and they adore each other. This bill at its core is about sustaining families. For Faeble, and all the other children who have a parent with a disability, please issue a favorable report on SB 790.

Sincerely,

Katie Fava
District 16 Maryland Resident